

Justice (or Vengeance Revisted

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Summary: A year after her murder, Jenny Calendar rises from the grave and must face a fundamental decision

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JUSTICE (or Vengeance Revisited)

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* * *

--People once believed that when someone dies, a crow carries their soul to the land of the dead. But sometimes, just sometimes, the crow could bring that soul back to put the wrong things right--

* * *

Buffy sprang over a tombstone and snapped a sharp kick into the vampire's chest, throwing the creature back into a flurry of quick punches as Angel intercepted it. A second vampire charged her and, ducking aside, she neatly flipped it over her hip. Twisting its arm straight into a joint lock, she pressed her foot down across its neck.

"Stake!" she called, holding out her free hand.

Angel nodded, spinning out from under his opponent's flailing arms, and flipped a sharpened wooden stake into the air in a high arc. As the weapon plunked into her palm with practiced ease, she drove it

down into the helpless vampire's chest and the demon exploded into a cloud of ash and dust with an airy wail.

"Stake!" she called, tossing the stake carelessly over her shoulder.

Angel ducked a wild swing from his vampire and countered with an uppercut. Spinning with the momentum of the blow, he whirled, snatching the stake out of the air and jamming it into his opponent's chest. Like its companion, the vampire burst into dust and wafted away on the breeze.

"Nice job." Buffy smiled at him admiringly, dusting her hands off against one another.

Angel balanced the stake in his hand for a moment before slipping it into the pocket of his long, black coat.

"That was almost fun." He smirked.

"Yeah," she agreed with a smile, "It IS getting to be less like work and more sports-like, isn't it? Maybe we should hold try-outs?"

A piercing caw cut through the night and they both started nervously. A bird with glossy black feathers and a needle-sharp, inky black beak, crouched on the end of a long twisted tree branch, watching them with keen, intelligent eyes.

"Whew! It's just a crow." Buffy pressed her hand to her chest and blew out a long sigh, "Nearly jumped out of my skin there."

The crow regarded her steadily. She felt an eerie chill creep up her spine and she found herself mesmerized by the black feathered bird.

Angel wrapped his arms around her from behind and pressed his cheek close to hers. "Think we might be able to knock off a little early tonight?"

She leaned back against him and closed her eyes languidly. "Yeah. I guess maybe we could make tonight an exception."

A fat, cold drop of wetness fell out of the sky and landed on her cheek, startling her into alertness. Above them, a low, barely audible, grumble of thunder sounded in the dusky clouds as a sheet of fine rain began to fall.

"Oh no!" Buffy squealed, burrowing under Angel's arm as he lifted his coat over his head to shield them both from the rain.

"Let's get out of here and go somewhere warm and dry." He suggested, folding an arm around her shoulders and running with her for the graveyard's exit. "I think that's the last of the walking dead we'll see tonight."

As the rain poured down and the pair scurried happily for shelter, the crow's dark, glittering eyes followed them unerringly. The bird hopped from its perch and sailed down along the ground until it came to a tall, gray tombstone. With a fluttering of shiny, black wings, it alighted on the stone and squawked.

The rain began to fall harder, pounding into the earth in a deafening rush. At the foot of the grave marker, the sod parted and a slender hand pushed through the dirt. An arm followed and then a head as a woman dragged herself haltingly from the sodden earth, flopping out of the crude hole and onto her side.

She had opened her eyes to darkness. Sheer total blackness that had surrounded her for eternity, only she couldn't see it until now. Acting purely on instinct, she had clawed her way to the surface, desperate to draw a breath of air. But she didn't need to breathe anymore because she was dead.

She rose unsteadily to her knees and sucked in a sharp breath to scream, but the air caught in her throat. She fell forward, her lips working soundlessly and her mind swept up in a whirlwind of sensations. Moaning, she pressed her cheek to the grass and dug her fingers into the ground to brace herself, clinging to the solidity of it.

The crow spread its wings and cawed sharply, a sound that crashed harshly against the woman's ears. She fell back onto the wet grass, frozen in fear, her face looking pale and lost as she stared into the bird's jet black eyes. It watched her patiently from atop the gravestone, cocking its head sharply from time to time, rain dripping from the tip of its black beak.

She looked closely at the bird as it waited, tapping its beak against the hard stone. The woman crawled toward it on her knees, her eyes wide and unblinking, and carefully stretched out her hand. Touching her fingertips to the cold, wet grave marker, she ran them softly across the words that had been engraved on it.

IN LOVING MEMORY Miss Jennifer Calendar 1966 - 1998

Jamming her eyes shut, she pressed her cheek against the cold, slick stone and dug her fingernails into it. A long, piteous wail, a cry of utter anguish and loss, drew itself out of her as black tears spilled from the corners of her eyes and washed away in the falling rain.

* * *

"Do you think we should say anything?" Buffy huddled close behind her locker door and whispered conspiratorially to Willow.

"I don't know." The auburn-haired girl answered uncertainly, "Maybe we should. He's bound to find out eventually."

"I'm sure he will." Buffy agreed, "I just don't want to be the one to have to tell him."

"Tell him what?" Xander popped his head around the corner, the black hood of his poncho dripping with rainwater. "Tell who? Is it me? Cause if it is, you can tell me." He paused for an instant, "Unless it's something I really don't want to hear. In which case, you can keep it to yourselves. Is it about me?"

"It's NOT about you." Buffy assured him, shooing him away with her hands. "Something happened at the cemetery last night after Angel and I finished patrolling. Will you quit dripping on me? I just got dry."

"Oh, sorry," he apologized, slipping the garment over his head and stuffing it into his locker, "What kind of something? Vampires?"

"No," she shook her head, "We dusted the only two that were there. But the paper said there were three open graves this morning."

"Pardon me for not panicking here," Xander cocked his head, "But isn't one little vampire on the loose a little small to get wiggled over? I'm sure you'll get him tonight."

"Tell him whose grave it was." Willow looked to Buffy solemnly.

"It was Miss Calendar."

Xander blinked in shock and backed up a step. "But she was killed last year." He gasped, then turned to Buffy, "She wasn't . . . bitten, was she?"

Buffy shifted uncomfortably. Angel had never talked to her about the night that, as the soulless vampire Angelus, he had hunted Miss Calendar through the halls of the school and killed her. It hurt him greatly to think about it and she had made a point never to press him.

"I-I don't think so." she caught the edge of her lip between her teeth in worry, not entirely sure, "From what I remember Giles saying and what little I got from . . . Angel . . . no, I don't think so."

"Even if she was, it's been too long." Willow noted, "If a vampire doesn't rise after the first night, then it'll never rise." Her features clouded over with horror, "You-you don't think that she-she was trapped underground all this time, do you?"

"Ugh, I hope not." Xander made a disturbed face, "Hey, look at the bright side. We live on a Hellmouth. Maybe something just dug up her body for a snack or - That's not much of a bright side, is it?"

The three looked to each other helplessly.

"I guess I should be the one to tell Giles." Buffy slung her backpack over her shoulder and headed for the library, "I hope he doesn't get too upset."

* * *

A dark, shadow perched on the water-drenched rooftop, dressed all in black with long strands of dripping hair hanging down in her face. Eyes closed, she watched through the alien vision of her black-feathered companion as the crow peered in through the window of the library.

She watched, still as a statue, as Buffy walked slowly into the room and turned toward the librarian's small office. A man wearing a tweed coat and a pair of round-rimmed, wire framed glasses sat quietly behind a scarred wooden desk, staring blankly into the pages of an

old book.

Buffy leaned against the doorjamb and knocked softly.

"What is it, Buffy?" he sighed grimly, his eyes still directed at the book.

"I take it you heard about the cemetery." She said, carefully stepping into the room, "About-"

"Jenny, yes." He dropped the book and rose hastily, turning his back to Buffy and shuffling through the contents of a small cabinet. "I read about it in the newspaper this morning."

"I'm sorry, Giles." She tried to console him.

"I suppose it's someone's sick idea of a joke." His voice seethed as he ducked his head angrily, still facing the cupboard. "Or vengeance."

Outside, the crow cawed and, under the cover of the raging downpour, the newly risen Jenny Calendar winced at the resurgence of an unbidden memory.

"You know what it is, this thing vengeance?" a far-off voice inside her head asked, "To the modern man vengeance is a verb, an idea. Payback. One thing for another. Like commerce. Not with us. Vengeance is a living thing. It passes through generations. It commands. It kills."

Inside the library, Buffy watched her mentor with concern. "Giles, this could be anything. Or maybe even nothing. We don't know yet."

Giles removed his glasses and rubbed the back of his hand across his eyes tiredly. "You're quite right, Buffy. I'm sorry. I didn't sleep well last night. Nightmares."

"About what?"

"I don't really remember. Something about a flock of birds, I think." He slumped back into his chair. "Whatever it was, it was very unsettling. And now, I have to deal with this."

"Look, why don't I start patrolling early tonight, make a few passes by the cemetery. Maybe I can pick up a few pieces to our puzzle."

"Thank you. I know that this is probably nothing, but it feels like I've lost her all over again and I . . . I . . ." he spread his hands helplessly, at a loss for words.

"I know." She nodded solemnly, laying a consoling hand on his shoulder, "We'll find her, Giles. I promise."

At the window, the crow squawked and, spreading its wings, took flight. Jenny bolted, running across the rooftop as fast as her legs could carry her, eager to lose herself in the sensation of numbing rain and whistling wind. She ran with abandon until she reached the other side of the school and leaped, her arms outstretched. She

sailed all the way to the tree line and hooked her hands around a thick branch, swinging up and launching herself into the air like an acrobat. The flesh of her hands had been torn bloody by the rough bark, but healed in an instant, unnoticed.

She sailed through the air and landed easily in a crouch in the center of a busy road. The driver of a wide-bodied, black sedan saw her at the last moment and jammed on his brakes. Tires squealing, the car spun out of control, its back end whipping around and slamming into her with the force of a wrecking ball.

Her body hurtled through the air and landed almost forty feet away in a heap on the asphalt. The driver of the sedan scrambled out of his car and rushed through the pouring rain to stand over her.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry, lady. I-I didn't even SEE you!" he stammered, crouching down to get a closer look at her, "Are you all right?"

She lay still for a moment, stunned, until she realized that she wasn't hurt at all. She sat up quickly, staring past the man to the far side of the street where the crow waited atop a rusty, metal guard rail.

The man's eyes flew wide with horror when he saw her face. "I-I'm sorry, lady. Really." He stumbled back, away from her and turned, running as fast as he could, in the opposite direction of his car.

She watched him blankly as he disappeared into the woods. Rising, she walked slowly over to the abandoned car where it had settled, half out of the ditch on the side of the road and looked at her reflection in the window of the open door. Her face had gone from being attractively pale to bone white. Blackness had gathered around her eyes, reaching down in dark streaks to almost touch the black of her lips. It was like looking into the classical mask of theatrical tragedy.

She pressed her fingers against the glass, amazed that she could not feel it. Her sense of touch registered a smooth, hard resistance, but no emotion accompanied the sensation. There was only cold, hard, tactile data.

Her face screwed into a pained expression as she studied the reflection. A low whine vibrated in her throat as she pushed her hand against the window with steadily increasing pressure. The window could only withstand so much and her arm crashed through the glass in an explosion of glittering shards. Blood ran along her fingers and she stared, fascinated by it until, before her very eyes, her wounds closed and the blood disappeared as if it had never been.

A high pitched, strangled moan rose from deep inside her and, her eyes wide and mad, she pressed her hands to her face and raked her nails down across her cheeks. Her fingers left bloody furrows in their wake, but, like the cuts on her arm, they healed instantly. Thrashing madly, she screamed, tugging violently at fistfuls of her hair. She fell back onto the ground and continued to scream, a sound at once chilling and pitiful, ripping and clawing at her flesh as she writhed fitfully.

After a while, the futility of what she was doing became apparent. She let her arms fall and lay limp and disheveled on the ground, unmoving, her dark eyes staring blankly up into the clouds.

The crow sailed in and alighted on a low tree branch. It squawked and shook the water from its wings, again fixing her with its patient gaze. Get up, it seemed to say to her, there is much to do.

Jenny sat up, watching the bird. Last night, just minutes after she had arisen, the crow had looked at her in that same way before leading her to an all-night laundromat where she had quickly made off with the clothes she was now wearing. It wanted something else this time and she felt inclined to obey.

So little had been clear to her when she had first awoken, she had felt so lost and frightened. The crow was guidance, a point of illuminating light in a sea of shrouding darkness, and she knew that, through it, she would find clarity.

Climbing to her feet, she started walking along the side of the street, the crow perched steadily on her shoulder.

* * *

"You know how much I wish this rain would stop?" Buffy muttered, pulling the hood of her parka tight around her face and ducking under another awning.

Willow followed close behind, hugging her schoolbooks close to her body to shield them.

"Patrolling is the pits in this weather." Buffy continued to complain, "I mean, how is a Slayer supposed to do her mystic duty if we can't even get a patch of clear sky. I could get pneumonia or something, you know?"

"I don't think the monsters take that into consideration when they go on a rampage." Willow reasoned, pressing her back against the cold brick wall to best make use of the limited dry space.

"Stupid monsters." Buffy made a distasteful face, "They never think of anyone but themselves. I wish my Mom was home, then we wouldn't have to walk through this."

"Looks like we aren't the only ones." Willow pointed to a dark figure, a woman, walking along the far side of the road, barely discernible through the steady downpour. "I don't think she's even wearing a coat."

Buffy squinted, sensing something odd in the air. A jet black crow shifted on the woman's shoulder and cawed sharply, spreading its wings. A shiver ran down Buffy's spine as the sound reached her ears. Abandoning the relative safety of the awning, she dashed out into the rain.

"Hey!" she called to the woman.

The woman's head snapped up and the crow squawked warningly. Buffy's jaw dropped. Standing less than twenty feet away, she recognized Jenny immediately. She was dressed in black jeans and ankle-high,

black boots and wore a short sleeved shirt, also black. Behind a wall of rain-drenched hair, her face was pale and her dark eyes wide and unblinking like those of a terrified animal.

"Oh my God." She whispered, her hand hovering close to her mouth, "You're back."

Jenny bolted, heading straight for the forest, while the crow took flight.

"Wait!" Buffy shouted, starting after her.

A car horn blared as a truck drove by, nearly clipping her, and she was forced to jump back. Her schoolbooks tumbled from her hands and landed in a shallow puddle.

"Oh, great!" she complained, crouching down to retrieve her things. Unnoticed, a small photograph of her and Angel together floated slowly away along a small riverlet.

She held her sodden books at arms length in a vain attempt to let the water drip off them. Looking across the road, she saw a single branch swaying slowly from side to side, evidence of Jenny's passage.

"She's not a ghost, at least." She muttered to herself.

* * *

Jenny fled into the forest, running from something she could not identify. The girl that had called to her on the street had seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it. The sound of her voice had triggered something, a pain that welled up from inside, heavy and dull, like lead, and she had run because she knew of no other way to try and escape it.

Her body collided with a tree and she latched on to it, clinging and sliding gradually to the ground, her face and hands pressed against the rough bark. Pain and guilt twisted inside her, a punishment for something she had done to the girl in the past but could not remember. She hugged the tree tightly, in hope that the pain would pass, or at least abate somewhat, but it remained constant.

The crow landed on a low branch near her face and dropped something in the wet grass. It was a photograph of the girl from the street and a young man. Jenny reached out slowly and brushed her fingers across the image of the man's face.

A flash of memory hit her with the force of a lightning bolt. Her body jerked and went rigid, shuddering violently and a strangled moan shook from her lips. She ran through the hallways of Sunnydale High, fleeing for her life. The young man from the picture, a vampire, was chasing her, following her every move flawlessly. Fear tightened in her chest and closed her throat over, her feet felt like that had been encased in concrete. She ran as hard and as fast as she could, but the floor moved so painfully slow beneath her. He appeared out of nowhere before her and caught her about the face, wrapping one hand behind her head and crushing two fingers of the other against her lips. Her heart pounded painfully in her throat and terror consumed her.

"Sorry, Jenny, this is where you get off." He grinned evilly at her.

With a powerful wrench, he twisted her neck until it broke and then, all became darkness.

She fell back against the tree, shaking madly. The face of the man who had murdered her seared into her brain, burning away all else. She screamed and clawed wildly at her skull, trying to purge the image from her mind, but it would not leave.

He had murdered her in cold blood, ripped her life away from her for no reason other than utter cruelty. Murdered. Dead, that's what she was. Like him.

The crow squawked sharply and spread its wings wide. She looked into its dark, alien eyes and the agony subsided into a dull, empty ache. She understood now why she had returned. There was only one way to free herself from the pain, only one path for her to follow. Vengeance required an offering. Angel would have to die.

* * *

"Are you sure it was her?" Giles asked for the fifth time, pacing back and forth across the library.

"Trust me." Buffy watched his agitation with concern, "I got a good close look. She was confused, lost, you know, like she didn't know who I was. Then she just took off into the woods. She was fast, too. I don't think I could have caught her on my best day."

"She can't be a vampire." Willow reasoned, "Even on a cloudy day like today, she wouldn't last five minutes. What do you think she is? A ghost?" Her face clouded over with anxiety, "O-or a doppleganger, like the one that looked like me?"

"No." Buffy shook her head in negation, folding her arms tightly, "This felt different, totally creepy, like walking over a grave or something."

"Then what?"

"Her face was all white and black like those freaky dolls I made my mom throw away. And then there was that bird." Buffy suppressed a momentary shudder, "Thing totally gave me the wig. And I don't ever remember her having such a jones for black. Maybe it's a fashion statement, but goth is ghaundi."

"The bird may be a clue." Giles flipped madly through the pages of an ancient book, "There are old wives tales which tell of crows being guardians of the dead."

"Welcome to Sunnydale." Buffy announced, "Where the old wives tale meets reality. Which is funny seeing how not many wives get to be old around here."

"Somehow, I don't really feel like laughing right now." Willow looked glumly at her feet.

"Don't worry, Will." Buffy reassured her, "You can drown your sorrows in research." She dropped a thick tome onto the table in front of her friend. Despite herself, Willow brightened somewhat.

"It's almost sundown. I'm going to make an early patrol then I'll be right back, okay?"

Giles made no response, staring blankly into the book in his hands, lost in thought.

"Hello?" she waved her hand before his eyes. "Earth to Giles? Buffy. Leaving. Back. Soon."

"Whu? O-oh, yes, c-carry on." He stammered, startled out of his reverie. "G-good luck."

"We'll get to the bottom of this, Giles." She whispered, laying her hand gently on his arm, "I promise."

He squeezed her hand in appreciation and nodded briefly. "We'll hold down the fort here until you get back."

As Buffy headed for the door, he stopped her. "Buffy, we have no idea what we're dealing with here. Please, be careful."

"Always am." She smiled waving goodbye and pushing out through the swinging, double doors. "I'm sure I won't run into any trouble."

* * *

Jenny crouched just outside a second story window to the old mansion, hanging precariously by her fingers from the rough, shingled awning. She felt no fear of falling, felt nothing except the burning need for revenge. HE was inside, she knew, the one whose face and name had become a part of her, a poison in her blood.

On the lip of the roof, the crow cawed, waiting for her to make a move. She dug her fingertips solidly into the old wooden boards and turned herself upside down, crawling down along the wall like a spider until she could see through the top of one of the first floor windows. She spotted her killer, crouching by a newly lit fire, warming his hands. She swung down and through the window with a crash of shattering glass to land crouched in the center of the room.

Angel spun around and his eyes went wide with horror.

"No." he breathed, stumbling back a step.

Jenny stood slowly, savoring the fear in his eyes.

"Long time no see." She grinned, "Miss me?"

Wasting no time, she sprang forward, smashing a hard fist across his jaw and snapping a powerful side kick into his ribs. He folded over, crashing backwards into a high backed chair, tumbling with it to the floor.

He barely had time to sit up before she smashed the tip of her boot into his chin, snapping his head back and sending stars before his

eyes. He rolled and threw the chair behind him, desperately trying to buy enough time to regain his feet. She leaped easily up and over the bulky obstacle into another graceful kick, her arms spread like wings, and drove her foot into the center of his back. He hit the wall hard, face first, and fell to one knee.

Looking down at the chair, she neatly snapped off a leg and inspected its jagged wooden tip. She grabbed him by the back of the neck and hauled him to his feet, turning him around and pinning his back to the wall. The tip of the makeshift stake pressed into his skin, just inches above his vampire heart.

"I want you to be afraid." She whispered, her voice low and steely. "Like I was."

"I don't know what to say to you, Jenny," Angel's eyes were dark with remorse, "except that I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it!" she snarled, jamming her forearm up against his windpipe. "I'm here so you can pay for your sins." She considered the crude stake in her hand for a moment and shook her head angrily, disappointed. No, this would end it too quickly. He needed to suffer. Her dark eyes wandered across the room to the black painted picture window and the barely visible sun sinking over the horizon. Turning back to him so that their noses were almost touching, her face pulled into a mad grin.

* * *

Buffy jogged steadily along the back streets, her mind lost in thought. She had promised to run an early patrol, but it had only been an excuse. Her true intention had been to check in with Angel. He had not heard about Jenny's apparent reappearance and she wasn't sure how he was going to take it. The last time he had seen an apparition of her, he had become so distraught that he had almost killed himself. Buffy just wanted to check in with him and see that he was all right.

She approached the mansion, hopping over the short gate and bouncing up the walk. A harsh caw cut through the air, startling her. She jumped, coming face to face with a large, black crow. The bird spread its wings and squawked angrily.

"Oh, no." she breathed, breaking swiftly for the front door.

There was an explosion of wood and glass as Angel hurtled through the big picture window and landed hard, bouncing on the grass. An instant later, a dark shape shot through the window after him, its arms spread wide overhead, and landed gracefully, just past his head.

Angel writhed about on the ground, pulling his shirt tight over his face, and scrambled for cover as the weak late-day rays of the sun began burning his flesh. Jenny grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and hauled him back, away from the shadows.

Buffy leaped between them, twisting Jenny's arm and tearing the collar off his shirt.

"Go!" she screamed, smashing her elbow under Jenny's chin and shoving

him forward, "Find cover!"

Jenny snarled in irritation, grabbing Buffy by the arm and squeezing with a grip of steel. The blonde girl cried out in pain and Angel froze, smoking rising slowly from his skin, caught between saving his own life or Buffy's.

"GO!" Buffy squirmed around and flipped the apparition over her hip.

He hesitated, but obeyed, limping into a deep shadow against the side of the mansion.

Jenny rose swiftly, her head turned down, and looked up under fine, black brows with narrowed, angry eyes.

"Get out of my way." Jenny warned, her voice thin and strong, like steel.

Buffy smashed her fist across the woman's jaw. Jenny's head snapped wide, but the blow seemed to have no effect on her.

"You better do better than that." The white faced, black eyed woman giggled.

Buffy struck wildly with a series of hard punches to her face, back and forth, again and again. Jenny took the blows stoically, patiently, her grin growing even wider. Buffy stepped back as the woman advanced, her arms tiring from the frantic assault.

"You can't stop me." Jenny declared, the mad grin falling away and her eyes narrowed and filled with hatred. She pointed a long finger over Buffy's shoulder at Angel. "I am Vengeance."

Vengeance is a living thing, the words echoed in her mind, it passes through generations. It commands. It kills.

But what of Justice? A small, barely remembered part of her asked.

It is not justice we serve, the voice of her dead uncle Enyos answered, It is Vengeance.

Throwing her head back, she started to laugh, a small sound at first, barely a chuckle, but then rising into a harsh, biting sound with a resonance that would have made an opera singer envious. She clapped her hands to her ears, and fell to her knees with a strangled, pained groan, struggling with the force of it.

Buffy whipped off her raincoat and threw it over Angel, urging him out of the shadows. Her eyes glued to the apparition in fascinated horror, she took him by the arm and made a break for the street. Jenny knelt in the wet grass, her hair hanging down in her face, alternating sounds of strained tension and harsh, mad laughter emanating from her.

The crow squawked and spread its wings angrily at Angel and Buffy as they ran past. Jenny's head snapped up and her mirth fell silent. Snarling viciously, her face contorted and she bounded after the pair with the speed and ferocity of a puma.

Buffy ran for the street, half dragging Angel beside her, spotting a pickup truck with an open bed as it drove by. Wasting no time, she scooped Angel over her shoulder and tossed him into the back before clutching to the side and tugging herself up after him.

Jenny growled, clamping her fingers tightly around Buffy's ankle and pulling violently. Buffy kicked hard with her free leg, smashing the heel of her sneaker into Jenny's throat. The apparition ignored the blow, snarling like a wild animal and clawing desperately to gain purchase on the moving truck.

Angel grabbed up a shovel and smashed the flat of it against the top of her head with no effect. The crow squawked raucously, fluttering around them and clawing at his face. Drawing the shovel high overhead, he accidentally clipped the bird. The crow cawed and fell away and, simultaneously, Jenny lost her grip, tumbling to the rough pavement. Angel immediately dropped his weapon and curled into a ball, rewrapping Buffy's raincoat around his face and hands. She threw herself over him to further shield him from the burning sun.

The apparition of Jenny Calendar jumped to her feet and screamed, a long, drawn out note of absolute rage, her body rigid and shaking with the strain, as she watched her prey escape with baleful, fiery eyes.

* * *

Willow typed a new set of search keywords into her data base engine and waited for a reply. She sighed and rested her chin heavily on her hand. So far, she had come up with nothing. Xander had already started to doze in his seat next to her, an open book laying against his chest.

Reflexively, she opened the first website on the list, noting the unpleasant length of the list she would have to comb through. The file opened up and an old photograph of a crow with outstretched wings was displayed.

Immediately, she snapped to attention.

"Uh, Giles," she beckoned absently with her hand, "C-could you come here and look at this for a minute?"

Giles, buried behind a towering stack of books until now, stood quickly and joined her next to the computer monitor.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think I found what we're dealing with." Her face darkened with worry, "I-it's not very good."

Giles leaned over the desk and peered closer at the screen. "This looks like some sort of ritualistic sigil. Does it say what it means?"

Willow nodded slowly, biting her lower lip. "It represents vengeance, Giles. And death."

"She's going to kill Angel." Giles gasped and straightened, shocked realization sinking in.

There was a loud peal of thunder and the lights flickered momentarily. Somewhere in the school, a window shattered and glass clattered against the hard tiled floor. Xander started awake and Willow cowered fearfully in her chair.

"W-what was that?" she whispered nervously.

"Wait here." Giles went to the book repository and opened a heavy strongbox. Reaching inside, he pulled out a heavy crossbow. Hooking his foot through the stirrup at the end, he pulled back hard on the string until it slowly bent the arms back and clicked into place. He slipped a heavy bolt into the groove and notched it against the firing mechanism.

"It's probably just a tree branch or something." He surmised, "I'll go check it out."

"We-we can come with you, you know." Xander offered, a quaver of nervousness in his voice, "I mean strength in numbers and all that, right?"

"No." Giles shook his head briefly, "You two stay here. I'll be right back."

Hefting the heavy crossbow over his shoulder, he pushed out through the swinging library doors.

"Oh, sure," Xander complained, "but are we still gonna BE here when he gets back. That's what I'D like to know. He could have at least left us some weapons."

"I don't like this." Willow muttered, "It's getting dark now and I hate storms. Remember what happened when we went camping in your back yard when we were six?"

"Yeah," he smirked, "After my Dad spent all that time setting up the tent and you wouldn't even go inside it."

"Storms are creepy." She sniffed indignantly, "They're loud and you could get hit by lightning or drown or something."

"Oh, come on, Will." He patted her jovially on the shoulder, "Think about where we live. Are you really that worried about being killed by lightning?"

There was a blinding flash and thunder cracked again almost instantly overhead, rattling the library windows. Willow jumped into Xander's arms and clung to him fearfully.

"Relax, Will." He cautioned her, "It's no big deal, just a loud noise."

The library doors burst open and a dark, hulking shape strode through.

"AAAHHHH!" Xander and Willow screamed in unison, clinging to each other and stumbling backwards.

Buffy set Angel down in a nearby chair and slicked her sopping hair back out of her face.

"Where's Giles?" she panted.

"Buffy!" Willow ran to her and gave her friend a hug. "You're drenched."

She turned to Angel and her hand flew to her mouth. "Ohmygosh! What happened to you?"

As he unwrapped Buffy's parka from around his head, she could see how his skin was pink and blistered, as if from a severe sunburn.

"I'll be fine." He slumped weakly in the chair.

"Miss Calendar was after him." Buffy explained. "I don't know what's happened to her, but it's made her REAL mad. I was hoping Giles would be able to help."

"We didn't find much." Willow supplied, "And what we did find was sorta of the bad news variety."

She turned the computer monitor around so that Buffy and Angel could see.

"A crow carries the spirit of the dead to its final resting place." She read aloud, "But sometimes when the death is so terrible and the spirit cannot rest, the crow will carry it back to the land of the living. Vengeance feeds it after that and the body will not die until the spirit's revenge is taken."

Buffy looked fearfully in Angel's direction. His face was knotted in anxiety and remorse.

"We should find Giles." She said.

"He went to check out a noise." Willow said, "He said he'll be right back."

"I tried to tell him." Xander spread his hands helplessly, "I mean, doesn't he know ANYTHING about horror situations. Obviously, the man has not seen 'Scream'."

"We have to find him," Buffy asserted, "before Miss Calendar finds us."

"Too late." Jenny's voice sounded ominously from the library entrance.

Buffy whirled and ducked as the crow flew, squawking, into her face and then up, into the rafters. Jenny stood blocking the only exit to the room, her hands and feet set wide and challenging.

"What do you want?" Buffy demanded.

"You know what I want." Jenny answered darkly, her eyes locked on Angel. "Now get out of my way."

"I won't let you kill him." Buffy cocked her fist back, a sharpened stake held tight in her fingers, and lunged at Jenny's apparition.

"I said get out of my way!" Jenny backhanded her hard, snapping her head to the side and throwing her back into a tangle of chairs. One of the chairs shattered and the stake flew from her hand to clatter across the large, central table.

As Angel struggled to rise and protect his fallen love, Willow stepped between them. Absently, Jenny grabbed her by the hair and threw her aside as if she were no more than a small child. She crashed painfully into Xander, driving them both roughly to the floor.

"You're mine!" Jenny leaped forward and snatched Angel by the back of his neck. He tried to escape, but her grip was too strong. Shoving him forward, she smashed his forehead off the corner of the polished wooden table and rolled him to one side. Deliberately, she reached out and closed her fingers around the stake that Buffy had lost. Leering, she leaned across his body as tenderly as a lover and propped her chin on the blunt end of the stake, its tip just inches above his heart.

"You liked killing me didn't you, Angel?" she smiled, her eyes as hard and cold as obsidian.

"I-I'm sorry, Jenny." He struggled under her, but froze as she pressed down a little harder on the stake. "I can't take it back. I wish I could."

"You know what?" she smirked, "So do I."

Her face twisted into a mask of rage and, holding the stake in place, she reared suddenly, raising her other hand into a fist overhead, like a hammer.

"Jenny, stop!" Giles burst through the library doors, the cocked crossbow in his hands, leveled at her back.

She stopped in mid-motion and everyone in the room seemed caught in a frozen instant of time. Jenny turned her attention away from Angel, the uncontrolled fury on her face falling away into nothingness.

"Jenny, please, let Angel go." Giles begged her.

She slid off her prey slowly, her eyes wandering to Giles and his crossbow. Gracefully, she sauntered toward him, a strange animal curiosity in her eyes.

Buffy clambered through the wreckage of the broken chair and rose, slow and unsteady, to her feet, ready to defend her Watcher.

"No, Buffy." Giles cautioned her with an outstretched hand, "Leave her alone."

Reluctantly, Buffy held back, clear of the path Miss Calendar was gradually making toward her mentor.

"You going to shoot me?" Jenny sneered, grasping the tip of the crossbow and planting it against her chest, "Go ahead."

Giles watched her with wide, unblinking eyes, his heart fluttering like a wild hummingbird in his chest.

"You can't kill me." She grinned, "Thanks to HIM, I'm already dead."

"Let him go, Jenny. Angel is not the same person he once was. His soul. . ." his voice trailed off.

"He deserves to die." She growled, jabbing the crossbow into her chest, "And the only way you can stop me is to shoot me. Do it!"

He shook his head in refusal, his trembling fingers loosening their grip on the weapon.

"Fool!" she snarled viciously, tearing the crossbow out of his grasp and knocking him to the floor.

Buffy and Angel started forward to help him, but Jenny whirled around and held the crossbow at arm's length with one hand, aimed directly for Angel's heart. Instantly, Buffy stepped in front of him, her arms outstretched defensively.

"You think I won't kill you?" Jenny demanded, her lip curling with outrage. "As long as he dies, nothing else matters."

Giles climbed to his feet behind her, his face drawn with misery. A thousand times before, he had imagined seeing her again, imagined being this close to her. But he had never imagined it like this. Death had changed her, made her angry and full of hatred. When she had been alive, life had been the most precious thing in the world to her. Now, death seemed to have become the only thing she knew.

He reached out and touched Jenny's shoulder, the backs of his fingers accidentally brushing the skin of her cheek. Jenny screamed, like she had been terribly burned by the contact, and her arms flew to the sides of her skull. Growling in agony, she stood writhing, her hands convulsing around the hard wooden crossbow.

A thousand memories raced over her synapses faster than she could comprehend them. She was sitting behind a desk, in front of a classroom full of students. She stood and cheered amongst a throng of people at a local football game, feeling a surge of pride and exhilaration flood through her. She closed her eyes and kissed the sweet, sweet man who stood before her and he kissed her back just as dearly. She trembled with fear and loathing after the demon known as Igon the Sleeper left her body. She watched helplessly as an arrow from a crossbow that she had fired wedged into the back of the man she loved, almost killing him. A torrent of remembered emotions expanded in her mind in the span of only a moment, threatening to destroy her.

Giles reached out to comfort her, but she shrank away fearfully.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed, turning her back to Buffy and Angel and aiming the crossbow at him.

She watched him like a frightened animal, shuddering and twitching, the whites of her eyes showing starkly against the black streaks while the memories slowly found their rightful places in her mind and settled in.

"Ru . . .Rupert?" she whispered, recognition registering gradually.
"Where am I?"

She let her arms fall to her sides. Giles eyes followed the crossbow as it dangled, forgotten, in her hand.

"Yes, Jenny. It's me." Giles offered his hand out to her, but she shied away, "I'm here to help you."

"I can't remember what happened to me." She moaned softly to herself, calming somewhat, "It's all so hazy."

There was a change in her voice now, a note that was so very different from the tone he had heard from her so far. She was afraid.

"Miss Calendar. . ." Buffy took a tentative step forward, her eyes full of apprehension. "I-I wanted to tell you something I never got the chance to say before. I'm sorry."

As Buffy neared her, the crow swooped down from the ceiling with a piercing caw and Jenny reacted instantly. Startled, she whipped around and leveled the crossbow alternately at Buffy, then at Angel. Behind them, Xander and Willow clung to each other in fear.

"Get back!" she cried, her face suffused with fury, "I'll kill you! I'll kill all of you if I have to! Vengeance must be served!"

But what of Justice?, again the tiny voice inside her asked.

"Jenny, stop!" Giles stepped directly in front of the weapon, his hands raised passively.

"No, no, no, no, no!" she backed away, shaking her head frantically from side to side, "Angel has to die. He has to pay for what he did to me. Please, don't make me kill you, Rupert."

"It doesn't have to be this way, Jenny." He said soothingly, "We can help you. There must be a way around this."

"He has to die." Her breathing was harsh and fierce as she looked down the stock of the crossbow at him, but her voice was shaky, uncertain. "I don't want to kill you, Rupert, but he has to die."

Perched on a nearby railing, the crow spread its wings and squawked in agreement.

"Put down the crossbow, Jenny." Giles implored, slowly closing the distance between them, his hand only inches from the crossbow, "Please, I-I love you."

She snarled and shook with frustration, her heart at war with the

primal force that had revived her. Angel had to die, Vengeance demanded it. But this was wrong.

The vampire's eyes showed fear, but the fear was for Buffy, not himself. The guilt of what he had done as Angelus hounded him, forcing him to strive to be a better person. He would become a hero because he had once been a villain. He did not deserve to die.

The crow squawked again, an angry reminder of what she had been reborn to do. Vengeance would accept nothing else but Angel's death.

"Vengeance is a living thing." The voice of her dead uncle Enyos echoed in her head, "It passes through generations. It commands. It kills."

But Vengeance was blind, ignorant to the subtleties of humanity. It knew only how to destroy. Justice, however, recognized compassion.

Her mind wavered between the two warring concepts, caught in a flurry of discord.

Vengeance.

Justice.

Vengeance.

Justice.

VengeanceJusticeVengeanceJusticeVengeanceJusticeVengeanceJustice

Love.

The turmoil ended abruptly and the muscles of her face relaxed into an expression of deadly calm. For the first time since she had arisen, her mind was perfectly clear.

"I love you, too, Rupert." She closed her eyes tightly and black tears seeped from the corners. "Goodbye."

Jerking the crossbow around, she quickly took aim and fired. Blinding agony exploded inside her as the arrow ripped forcefully through the body of the crow. She collapsed and the crossbow clattered from her spasming grip, her legs powerless and her body without feeling below the waist. The crow squirmed about, dying and she felt herself going with it.

"No." Buffy reached out powerlessly with one hand and mouthed the word, its sound lost in the horror of the moment.

Giles fell to his knees by Jenny's side and cradled her head in his lap. There were no wounds on her body, but she lay dying in his arms. He whispered a steady stream of comforting words to her, but she could only hear him distantly.

"I'm so sorry, " he wept softly, rocking her back and forth, "I wish

you could have stayed. I love you so much."

She tried to reply, to put her feelings into words for him to hear, but her body was just too weak. She wanted to tell him that she wanted to stay with him, too, but this was meant to be. She knew she had no place with the living anymore.

She expired with one final breath that wheezed out of her in a long, peaceful sigh. Tears spilled down Buffy's cheeks and she turned to the comfort of Angel's arms. Holding her tightly to his chest, the vampire stared at the torment that Giles was experiencing and wondered just how much guilt he could handle.

Looking up sadly to the ceiling, he realized that, this time, vengeance had been denied.

End
file.